

Preparing for Wildfire

Overview

Individuals can reduce the risk of injury or property loss due to wildfire by taking some precautionary steps to protect their family and home.

- Practice wildfire safety
- Develop an emergency plan
- Protect your home
- Create a fire safety zone around your home
- Plan for water needs
- Create a disaster supplies kit
- When wildfire threatens
- If you need to evacuate your home

If you live in a rural or woodland area, the danger of wildfire can be very real. It's impossible to predict a wildfire, so it's important to practice fire safety and to have an emergency plan in place. There are steps you can take to reduce the risk of wildfire damage to your home -- through construction, landscaping, maintenance, and emergency preparedness. And there are also steps you can take to protect your family.

Practice wildfire safety

Find out how to practice and promote wildfire safety in your community.

- *Contact the local fire department, health department, or forestry office for information on fire laws and sound fire safety practices.*
- *Check to make sure outdoor burning isn't banned before lighting a fire outdoors.* If outdoor burning is not banned, build your fire away from trees or bushes, and keep a fire extinguisher nearby. Never leave an outdoor fire unattended.
- *Make sure that fire vehicles can get to your home.* Clearly mark all driveway entrances and display your name and address.
- *Report hazardous conditions that could cause a wildfire.* Most wildfires are caused by people -- and are thus preventable. So report any unsafe practices in the neighborhood.
- *Teach children about fire safety.* Keep matches out of their reach.
- *Discuss fire safety with older relatives and relatives with a disability.* Consider investing in an emergency response system.

Develop an emergency plan

Develop a plan for how you and all family members will leave the house and the neighborhood in the event of a wildfire, and how you will regroup and communicate with each other. Keep it simple. The best emergency plans are those that are easy to remember.

- *Teach family members to stay low to the ground when escaping from a fire.*
- *Teach family members to never open doors that are hot.* In a fire, feel the bottom of the door with the palm of the hand. If it is hot, do not open. Find another way out.
- *Plan several escape routes away from the home.* Plan routes both by car and by foot (in case roads are impassable).

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- *Identify family meeting places in case you are separated during the escape.* Choose places outside your neighborhood -- such as a park or a public building. Have a back-up plan for getting back together, too. Ask an out-of-state friend or relative to serve as a family contact in case of a fire emergency, and make sure everyone in your family knows that person's name, address, and telephone number.
- *Post emergency telephone numbers next to each phone.* Teach children how to call 911 for help.
- *Practice fire drills at least twice a year.*
- *Talk to neighbors about wildfire safety.* Plan how the neighborhood could work together in the event of a wildfire. Make a list of each neighbors' skills, like medical or technical training.
- *Ask how you might help neighbors who have special needs, such as older adults or those with a disability.* Find out if you can serve as a back-up to check on neighborhood children who may be on their own if parents can't get home.

Protect your home

- *Regularly clean your roof and gutters.*
- *Inspect chimneys at least twice a year.* Clean them at least once a year. Keep the dampers in good working order. Equip chimneys and stovepipes with spark arresters (contact your local fire department for specifications and any local requirements).
- *Use 1/2-inch mesh screen beneath porches, decks, floor areas, and the home itself.* Screen openings to floors, roofs, and attics.
- *Install a smoke detector on each level of the home, especially near bedrooms.* Test these monthly and change the batteries once a year. Pick an easy-to-remember date to change the batteries, like a birthday, anniversary, or the first day of Daylight Saving Time.
- *Teach each family member how to use the fire extinguisher (A-B-C type) and show everyone where it's kept.*
- *Keep a ladder that will reach the roof.*
- *Use fire-resistant or non-combustible materials, such as tile, stucco, metal siding, and brick, on the roof and exterior structure of your home.* Treat wood or combustible materials used in roofs, siding, trim, or decking with UL-approved fire-retardant chemicals.
- *If possible, install electrical lines underground.*
- *Consider installing protective shutters or heavy fire-resistant drapes.*

- *Keep handy household items that can be used as fire tools.* These include a rake, an axe, a handsaw, a chainsaw, a bucket, and a shovel.

Create a fire safety zone around your home

Landscape the area around your home with wildfire safety in mind. Select materials and plants that can help contain fire rather than fuel it. Stone walls can act as a heat shield. Plant fire-resistant shrubs and trees. For example, hardwood trees (oak, maple, etc.) are less flammable than pine, evergreen, eucalyptus, or fir trees.

Create a 30- to 50-foot safety zone around the home -- 100 feet if your home is in a pine forest. Within this area, take steps to reduce potential exposure to flames and radiant heat. If neighbors live within this safety zone, try to enlist their help to protect each other's homes. If the house sits on a steep slope, standard protective measures may not be enough. Contact the local fire department or forestry office for additional information.

- *Rake leaves, dead limbs, and twigs.* Clear all flammable vegetation.
- *Remove leaves and rubbish from under structures.*
- *Thin a 15-foot space between tree crowns, and remove limbs within 15 feet of the ground.*
- *Regularly dispose of newspapers and rubbish at an approved site.* Follow local burning regulations.
- *Remove dead branches that extend over the roof.*
- *Prune tree branches and shrubs within 15 feet of a stovepipe or chimney outlet.*
- *Ask the power company to clear branches from power lines.*
- *Remove vines from the walls of the home.*
- *Mow grass regularly.*
- *Clear a 10-foot area around propane tanks and the barbecue.* Place a screen over the grill, using nonflammable material with mesh no coarser than one-quarter inch.
- *Place stove, fireplace, and grill ashes in a metal bucket, soak in water for two days, then bury the cold ashes in mineral soil (not humus or peat soil).*
- *Store gasoline, oily rags, and other flammable materials in approved safety cans.* Place cans in a safe location away from buildings.
- *Stack firewood at least 100 feet away and uphill from the home.* Use only UL-approved wood-burning devices.

Plan for water needs

- *Identify and maintain an adequate outside water supply such as a small pond, cistern, well, swimming pool, or hydrant.*
- *Have a garden hose that is long enough to reach any area of the home and any other structures on the property.*
- *Install freeze-proof exterior water outlets on at least two sides of the home and near other structures on the property. Install additional outlets at least 50 feet from the home.*
- *Consider obtaining a portable gasoline-powered pump in case electric power shuts off.*

Create a disaster supplies kit

If wildfire threatens, you won't have time to shop or search for supplies. Assemble a disaster supplies kit with items you and your family may need in an evacuation. Store these supplies in sturdy, easy-to-carry containers such as backpacks, duffle bags, or covered trash containers. Include the following:

- *A three-day supply of water* (one gallon per person, per day).
- *A three-day supply of non-perishable packaged or canned food and a non-electric can opener* (include food for any pets you may need to bring with you).
- *One change of clothing and sturdy footwear for each person, and one blanket or sleeping bag per person.*
- *A first-aid kit* that includes the family's prescription medications.
- *Emergency tools*, including a battery-powered radio, flashlight, plenty of extra batteries, and a utility knife.
- *An extra set of car keys and a credit card, cash, or traveler's checks.*
- *Sanitation supplies* (toilet paper, soap, toothbrush, etc.).
- *Special items for infant, older, or disabled family members* (formula, diapers, denture needs, eye care supplies, etc.).
- *An extra pair of glasses.*
- *A list of family physicians and veterinarians.*
- *A list of important family information.* Store important family documents in a waterproof container.

When wildfire threatens

If there is a warning that a wildfire is threatening the area, listen to a battery-operated radio for reports and evacuation information. Follow the instructions of local officials.

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- *Remove all combustible items from around the house, such as outdoor furniture, tarps, firewood, and lumber.*
- *Take down flammable drapes and curtains and close all venetian blinds and other noncombustible window coverings.*
- *Close all doors and windows inside your home to prevent drafts.*
- *If you have a fireplace, open the damper and close the fireplace screen.*
- *Close gas valves and turn off all pilot lights.*
- *Turn on a light in each room for visibility in heavy smoke.*
- *Place valuables that will not be damaged by water in a pool or pond.*
- *Move flammable furniture into the center of the home away from windows and sliding-glass doors.*
- *If hoses and water are available, set up sprinklers to dampen the roof, propane tanks, and anything else that might be damaged by fire. Wet or remove shrubs within 15 feet of the home.*
- *Confine pets to one room. Make plans to care for pets in case the family must evacuate.*
- *Arrange temporary housing at a friend or relative's home outside the threatened area.*
- *Back the car into the garage or park it in an open space facing the direction of escape. Leave the key in the ignition. Close garage windows and doors, but leave them unlocked. Disconnect automatic garage door openers.*
- *If advised to evacuate, do so immediately.*

If you need to evacuate your home

- *Wear protective clothing -- sturdy shoes, cotton or wool clothing, long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, gloves, and a handkerchief to protect face.*
- *Take the disaster supplies kit.*
- *Lock the home.*
- *Tell someone that you are leaving and where you are going. If this is impossible, leave a note.*
- *Choose a route away from fire hazards. Watch for changes in the speed and direction of fire and smoke.*

Following these recommendations will help you reduce the risk of wildfire damage to your home and your neighbor's homes. It will also help you better

protect your family and neighbors so that there is a more successful outcome for everyone in the path of a wildfire.

Adapted from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) publication *Surviving the Storm: A Guide to Wildfire Preparedness* and written with the help of Marjorie Dyan Hirsch, LICSW, C.E.A.P. Ms. Hirsch is an organizational crisis management specialist and corporate consultant in New York City. She is a credentialed alcoholism and substance abuse counselor, a certified employee assistance professional, and a board certified expert in traumatic stress. She provided debriefings for FEMA during the Oklahoma City bombing and for many major corporations after both World Trade Center crises.